

Women's  
SPORT AND  
FITNESS  
FOUNDATION

# Changing the game for girls

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# Introduction

## Over half of secondary girls say that “girls are put off sport and physical activity because of their experiences of school sport and PE”

The UK has a problem with levels of activity, fitness and obesity. Although the figures vary, that applies to people of all ages, social backgrounds, ethnic origins and gender. But the problem is particularly critical among girls. Just over one in ten girls at age 14 currently meet the official guidelines for physical activity, half the number of boys at the same age.<sup>1</sup>

This report presents new research that offers us the opportunity to begin to understand the causes of low levels of physical activity among girls. The project (the largest of its kind ever carried out in the UK) explores the views of girls – and boys – about physical activity, sport and PE, and the influence of schools, friends and families. It also includes interviews with parents and PE teachers. Importantly, the research points clearly to what can be done to help more girls get and stay active.

It is imperative that we act. Physical inactivity among children is associated with a range of outcomes from obesity to low self-esteem. Physical health affects children’s ability to learn and achieve their academic potential; taking part in sport and exercise develops skills in organisation, teamwork and leadership; for girls particularly, being physically active helps develop positive body image – crucial when 30% of girls aged 11-16 say they lack confidence in their appearance<sup>2</sup>. And all this at a time when adult women’s participation is in decline and British women are the most obese in Europe.

This research does bring some good news: it has found that overwhelmingly girls want to be active, to take part in physical exercise, and to stay healthy. What needs to change is not their appetite to get involved, but the type of

opportunities and level of encouragement that society, particularly in education, offers them to do so. While families are shown to have the biggest impact on children’s activity levels, schools are the places shown to be best placed to effect change.

It is the passionate belief of the Women’s Sport & Fitness Foundation (WSFF), and the other organisations involved in this research, that the over-riding priority of PE and school sport (PESS) should be the health, well-being and confidence of every child. That the overwhelming majority of our young women are leaving school with such dangerously low levels of physical inactivity, and in many cases, a related lack of confidence in their appearance and abilities, is simply unacceptable.

WSFF intends to campaign for change. Our recommendations provide a clear programme of action for government, schools and teachers. They have implications for public policy. They are also relevant to parenting. Alongside this report, we are also publishing a toolkit for school PE teachers – designed as a resource to help practitioners understand the issues and how to deal with them.

This project is supported by the Big Lottery Fund and was delivered in partnership with the Youth Sport Trust and with the support of a number of other organisations and individuals represented on a Steering Group, listed on the last page. Our thanks to all those who have given their support, expertise and time so generously.

**Sue Tibbals**  
Chief Executive  
Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation

<sup>1</sup> NHS Information Centre: Health Survey for England (2008).

<sup>2</sup> Girlguiding UK: Girls Attitude (2011).

# Executive summary

Surveys show that only 12% of girls aged 14 meet the official guidelines for physical activity – roughly half the number of boys at the same age. However 74% want to be more active<sup>1</sup>

This report offers a rare opportunity to hear the voices of girls themselves and reveals their attitudes to fitness and sport more than any previous research. It shows that a gender gap in participation begins in the later years of primary school, and then continues to widen at secondary school with years 8 and as 9 emerging key drop out points.

The reasons girls disengage are many. Families are shown to have the greatest influence, both in terms of role-modelling but also practical facilitation. However, this research shows that girls' activity can be inhibited by anxious parents who are setting more stringent rules concerning outdoor play for their daughters than their sons. Friends are also influential, particularly as children get older, and girls are more influenced by their friends than boys.

Closely connected to friendship is the degree to which social norms around being female and feminine are still affecting girls' attitudes and behaviour. Notably, being 'sporty' is still widely seen as a masculine trait. While 'sporty' boys are valued and admired by their peers, 'sporty girls' are not, and can be viewed negatively. Meanwhile, being feminine largely equates to looking attractive.

These social norms are a powerful influence and pose a challenge for traditional ways of delivering PE and school sport. While some schools have focused on these challenges, and been innovative in their response, this research shows that many girls are actually put off being active by their experiences in PE and school sport. A large number feel that too much PE and school sport is still focused on traditional competitive sport, and attention reserved for the sporty and talented. This research shows that this approach is working for a minority of girls – the 'sporty' girls. But it is a huge turn-off for the majority and in particular for the least active who are most at risk.

But these girls want to be active – and they know what would help them. They would like a greater choice of activities; they want to be able to take part in girl-only groups away from the gaze of boys; they want to be with their friends and have fun while exercising; they want to feel comfortable in what they wear and feel encouraged and rewarded for their efforts. The toolkit published with this report gives wide-ranging advice for making PE and school sport more inclusive, and references case studies from the many schools and PE staff that are already getting it right.

What we now need to do is make what is currently best practice into common practice. This research represents a clear challenge to everyone involved in education, from Government ministers to school Heads to PE staff. While traditional sport remains the focus of policy and delivery, the critically low participation of girls – and large numbers of boys – is set to continue.

Traditional sport has an important part to play – and delivered well, this research shows that the net for traditional sport could be significantly widened. The research finds that contrary to popular perceptions, girls do like competitive sport, for example. What they don't like are the behaviours that can go with it, such as being over-competitive and aggressive. Initiatives like the School Games and the development of Youth Sport Trust School Sport Clubs provide an important opportunity to involve more girls in sport, and help create a more inclusive sports culture if they proactively set out to do so.

The core responsibility of schools – and the priority for both parents and students – is health, and the most important educational legacy of schools should be that every girl leaves school having had a positive experience of being active, found activities she would like to carry on in adult life, and where appropriate, achieve her full potential. Achieving this will require a real commitment to change and a willingness to review how PE and school sport is delivered in this country so that every school offers the range of activities and the level of encouragement that can engage every child.

“The over-riding priority of PE and school sport should be the health, well-being and confidence of every child”

*Sue Tibballs, CEO of Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation*



## The report notes that:

### Overall activity levels

National data sources clearly demonstrate the significance of the problem in girls' physical activity levels. Latest data from the Health Survey for England shows that only 12% of girls aged 14 do enough physical activity to benefit their health. This is supported by data from a national survey carried out in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, which shows that 15% of girls aged 11-15 participate in the recommended levels of physical activity.

The problem is not a new one. In order to overcome the problem, this new research explored the patterns in girls' disengagement from sport and physical activity by age, in order to better understand where, and what kind, of interventions need to be made.

Our research showed that although activity levels between girls and boys are broadly the same in early years, a growing gender gap emerges in the final years of primary education and is reinforced at secondary school.

At Year 4 of primary school, girls and boys are doing similar levels of physical activity. However, by Year 6, girls are doing significantly less, and this gap increases as young people progress in to secondary school.

By year 9, half of boys report that they had undertaken 60 minutes of physical activity in five or more days in the previous week. The equivalent figure for girls is only 31%.

That is despite a wish on the part of girls to be active: three-quarters (76%) of 15-year old girls surveyed wanted to do more physical activity.

<sup>1</sup> NHS Information Centre: Health Survey for England (2007).



## Attitudes to sport and physical activity\*

- Both girls and boys are broadly positive about sport and physical activity, although girls, while not negative, are less favourable than boys.
- Both sexes become less positive about sport and physical activity as they get older, although the decline is greater among girls.
- Boys are more likely to say they like being part of a team/representing the school or are inspired by watching others.
- Girls are more likely to say that being active is fun, enjoyable, or they are influenced by their friends doing it.
- Girls perceive more barriers to being active than boys, and those barriers increasingly include body image issues as girls get older.
- By Year 9 both girls and boys agree that being thin is more important for girls than boys, while having lots of muscles is more important for boys. Girls feel that some aspects of sport – getting sweaty, dirty and messy – are unfeminine.

### 48% of girls agree that “getting sweaty is not feminine”.

- Both girls and boys also perceive that boys are given more encouragement to try sport and have more role models.

### Over half of all boys and girls agree that “there are more opportunities for boys to succeed in sport than girls”.

## Families

- Families have a big influence on activity levels of children, although that influence declines as children grow older.
- Generally, children said parents are very positive and played an important role both in terms of role modelling and also facilitating activity.
- Mothers are a particularly powerful source of encouragement for participation in sport and physical activity for younger girls.

### 37% of girls say that “I am motivated to be active because my mother/step-mother is active”.

- However, some parents can be complicit in girls’ disengagement from activity.

### A third of girls and boys agree that “families are less supportive of girls’ involvement in sport and physical activity”.

- Girls also said they are constrained by stricter rules as to where they can play.

## Friends

- Girls are highly motivated by social aspects of participation and very influenced by the behaviour of their friends – particularly as they get older. This is significantly more true of the least active.

### 57% of girls agree that “girls drop out of sport and other physical activity because their friends do”. The least active girls are twice as likely to agree with this statement as the most active.

- Being popular is not defined by being ‘sporty’ for girls – but is for boys. Boys receive more encouragement to be sporty from their friends.
- The transition from primary to secondary school disrupts friendship groups and so participation.

## School

- School is seen as the key location where attitudes to sport and physical activity are formed, and where interests and skills are developed.
- The most active girls are very positive about PE and school sport and want more of it.
- The least active tend to be very negative about PE and school sport and feel their experiences at school are putting them off being active.

### Nearly half of the least active girls – 46% – say they “don’t like the activities we get to do in PE” compared to just one in five – 26% – of the most active.

- Girls overall want more choice of activities in PE. The least active girls had enjoyed the less formal, less rule-based approach at primary school.
- Many girls do enjoy competition and like the opportunity to develop their skills. However, they dislike some of the behaviours that can go with it such as being over-competitive and aggressive.
- Overall, however, more girls thought an increase in competition would be detrimental than beneficial.

### 45% of girls say ‘sport is too competitive’.

- Many girls lack confidence in their skills and abilities, and particularly the least active.

- Over a quarter of girls say they don’t feel that they have the skills to do well in sport. Confidence in their skills is lower amongst girls who are less physically active – over a third of the least physically active girls we surveyed agreed with this statement.
- Many girls also feel very self-conscious about their bodies and appearance and don’t like to be seen exercising, particularly by boys.

### 76% of all girls agree that “girls are self-conscious about their bodies”. Just over a quarter of girls agree that “I feel my body is on show in PE and this makes me like PE less”. This rises to over a third of the least active.

- School space can be dominated by boys playing sport to the exclusion of girls and school facilities can be inadequate – girls are more likely to be turned off by dirty changing facilities.
- Girls would like teachers to be more encouraging and not just focus on the sporty.

### Over a third of all girls agree that “my PE teacher only pays attention to the kids who are good at sport”.

- Teachers feel that PE is not valued as part of the curriculum although it has an important role in developing skills such as teamwork.
- Teachers believe that sport for its own sake is less important than trying to get all pupils active and learning.

## 43% of girls agree that “there aren’t many sporting role models for girls”

# Recommendations

## National government

- Education authorities and schools should recognise the way in which current provision is failing girls and develop policies and strategies specifically to redress this.
- The Government's recommended level of physical activity for children is one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day. There is still an expectation that schools will continue to offer 120 minutes of PE per week but this is not a target. A new national target linked to the children's health outcomes framework would be highly desirable, along with a clear measurement framework. Currently there is no measurement system in place for children's activity levels either in school or outside.
- Policies and activities should reflect the principle that the overall aim of PE and school sports activity is fitness, self-confidence and broader educational achievement for all pupils, not simply those who are equipped for competitive sport.
- Ministers and other educational opinion-formers should make it clear that they regard sporting excellence as including the provision of activities that include all pupils, regardless of ability.
- Teacher training should be reviewed to ensure that PE staff are equipped to support and train every child in a wide range of activities.

- The opportunity presented by the new School Games should be optimised by ensuring schools put as much emphasis on their Level 1 school games programme (intramural sport) as they do Levels 2 and 3 (inter school).
- Initiatives, such as the Change4Life Primary Schools Clubs, need to be rolled out more widely to raise awareness among children of current inactivity levels and their consequences as with the '5 a day' campaigns that encourage healthy eating.
- Youth policy needs to better understand the impact of socio-cultural norms that affect young people's attitudes to acceptable body image and feminine, masculine identities particularly in relation to being active and 'sporty'. The PSHE curriculum should include discussion of these issues.
- Sport policy needs to be more pro-active in ensuring the British sport sector is genuinely inclusive, and that women's sport is supported and promoted on an equal footing with men's so that girls grow up to see sport as positive and aspirational.

## Local authorities and schools

- Schools should set their own targets and establish clear and public aspirations for 100% participation by pupils in physical activity.
- Schools should provide choice in physical activity wherever possible. They should seek the opinions of pupils on what activities are likely to drive maximum participation, and design PE to reflect that feedback.
- Schools should recognise and celebrate higher levels of overall participation as well as successes in competitive sport. A culture that celebrates active girls should be proactively encouraged.
- Schools should ensure that PE staff are welcoming and supportive of all pupils, irrespective of ability, and open-minded and creative in their approach to delivery.
- Non-PE staff should be encouraged to lead and mentor physical activity, particularly outside of PE lessons, before and after school and at break times.
- Schools should find opportunities to discuss issues around body confidence and appropriate 'masculine' and 'feminine' norms, including in PSHE lessons.
- If there are specific barriers in terms of facilities or clothing that discourage girls' participation, these should be addressed where possible.

# The research base

- If pupil feedback is that single-sex sporting choices would increase participation, or that sports space is exclusively used by boys, schools should make efforts to offer choices and provide girls only space.
- Schools should explore partnerships with external organisations, like clubs (of all kinds, including less orthodox choices such as dance, aerobics, martial arts etc), and charities (for fun runs and other motivational opportunities) in order to maximise participation.
- Schools should explore using alternative reward schemes like the notion of personal best to incentivise participation.

- The WSFF commissioned research surveying girls' and boys' attitudes to sport and physical activity.
- The research – carried out by the Institute of Youth Sport at Loughborough University, was split into two phases.
- In phase one, just over 1,500 boys and girls in the UK (341 from primary school and 1166 from secondary school) were surveyed to better understand how and when girls turn away from an active lifestyle, and why this process occurs.
- The questionnaires covered attitudes to sport, physical education and physical activity; the social support for physical activity; the local area; reasons for not getting involved in sport and PE; and broader influences on attitudes to sport and activity.
- The research was supplemented by 36 focus groups involving 169 young people (101 girls and 68 boys), at primary and secondary levels. The groups explored participation in physical activity from pre-school to their current age.

- 11 teachers were also asked to complete brief questionnaires on their experience of the barriers to participation in sport and PE.
- In phase two, 16 further focus groups (each meeting between one and three times) for girls only were carried out across years 5, 7, 8, and 10. The groups explored experiences, thoughts and opinions relating to three key aspects of sport and physical activity: competition and fun; family and friends; and identity.
- Six teacher interviews were carried out from the schools the focus groups were drawn from, exploring teacher opinions of girls' attitudes to sport and PE at school. A small number of questionnaires were also completed by parents of the girls involved, although take-up of this was very low.
- The research was carried out between September 2009 and August 2011 and the full research data is available at: <http://wsff.org.uk/publications/reports/changing-the-game-for-girls-full-research-report>



In focus groups girls said they felt their “voices were not being heard”

# Where we are now: a nation of inactive girls

# 1

## The facts are clear and depressing:

**Too few girls in the UK are physically active:** Just 12% of girls aged 14<sup>1</sup> meet the official guidelines for physical activity.<sup>2</sup> Boys are twice as active as girls at age 14 and 15.<sup>3</sup>

**This is a chronic problem:** starting in 2002, the Health Survey for England shows a persistent gender gap in activity levels.<sup>4</sup> A five year longitudinal study, beginning in 1999, conducted by University College London, also showed both marked reductions in physical activity between ages 11-12 and a decline in physical activity greater in girls than in boys.

**The UK has one of the worst problems in the world:** the latest Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development data shows that the UK is below the OECD average for overall physical activity of 11-15 year olds.<sup>5</sup> The UK has the worst rate of obesity in Europe and the third worst rate of obesity in the OECD (behind only the USA and Mexico).<sup>6</sup>

**Obesity is worryingly high in children:** almost more than one in three children are overweight in England, and more than one in three in Scotland.

**The lack of activity of girls matters for policy makers:** the proportion of obese women in the UK is predicted to increase from 26% to between 35% and 43%. This rise will lead to an extra 668,000 cases of diabetes, 461,000 extra cases of heart disease and 130,000 cases of cancer over the next 20 years, costing the NHS an extra £2bn a year.<sup>7</sup>

# Physical activity: levels

# 2

Our research reveals that there is no single turning point in girls' lives which leads to a fall in activity levels. Rather, participation levels are affected by a number of small changes over a period of time that ultimately result in disengagement. This bears out the results of other surveys.

## Primary level: children asked if they do "lots of sport and physical activity".

- Activity levels in the early years of primary school are similar between girls and boys. In Year 4, 60% of boys and 61% of girls say they were "doing lots of activity".
- However, by Year 6 there is already a pronounced gender gap. By this stage 73% of boys are "doing lots of activity", but only 39% of girls.
- Boys become more active between years 4 and 6 from (60% vs. 73%) while girls become less active in the same period (61.5% vs. 39%).

## Secondary School: children asked if "they participated in 60 minutes of activity of at least moderate intensity on 5-7 days of the last week".

- Regardless of gender, year 7 pupils do more physical activity than year 9 pupils, however the decrease between year groups is greater in girls.
- Just over half of year 7 boys (53%) reported that they had participated in 60 minutes of activity on 5 or more days in the previous week, compared to 49% of girls.
- During secondary school, a decline in physical activity occurs for both boys and girls. However, there is only a small decline for boys (from 53% in Year 7 down to 49% in Year 9). For girls in secondary schools however, activity levels fall sharply (from 49% in Year 7 to 31% at Year 9).

1 NHS Information Centre: Health Survey of England (2008), see figure 1.

2 The UK's Chief Medical Officers' guidelines for physical activity recommend that children aged between five and 18 should engage in moderate to vigorous activity for at least 60 minutes a day. These are in line with recommendations by the World Health Organisation.

3 NHS Information Centre, Health Survey of England (2008), see figure 1.

4 NHS Information Centre, Health Survey for England Trend Tables, see table 11.

5 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Health at a Glance (2010), see Chart CO1.9.B.

6 Ibid.

7 See NHS Choices and original research in The Lancet Volume 378, Issue 9793, Pages 815 - 825, 27 August 2011.

## Physical activity: attitudes

# 3

The decline in participation levels set out in section 2 masks an underlying demand. Girls do not reject activity, fitness, and health in their own right: in fact, they have a strong wish to be and remain active: three-quarters (76%) of 15-year-old girls say they would like to do more physical activity<sup>1</sup>.

In trying to understand why so few girls are active given these high levels of latent demand, this section reports on evidence of overarching attitudes towards sport and physical activity.

- Both girls and boys are broadly positive about sport and physical activity and recognise the benefits, although girls, while not negative, are less favourable than boys.
- Both sexes become less positive about sport and physical activity as they get older, although the decline is greater among girls.
- Boys are more likely to say they like being part of a team/representing the school or are inspired by watching others.
- Girls are more likely to say that being active is fun, enjoyable, or they are influenced by their friends doing it.
- Girls perceive more barriers to being active than boys, and those barriers increasingly include body image issues as girls get older.

Over half of all boys and girls agree that “there are more opportunities for boys to succeed in sport than girls”

- By year 9 both girls and boys agree that being thin is more important for girls than boys, while having lots of muscles is more important for boys. Girls feel that some aspects of sport – getting sweaty, dirty and messy – are unfeminine.
- Both girls and boys also perceive that boys are given more encouragement to try sport and have more role models.

The research shows some interesting similarities between boys and girls: both are broadly positive about sport and physical activity, and both become less positive as they get older – in part due to an increasing emphasis on academic success. However, the research also reveals some important gender differences: girls as they get older become relatively more negative in their attitudes to sport and physical activity overall, with a notable decline between years 7 and 9.

This may in part be a response to changes in the way they are experiencing school sport, which becomes more team-based and organised as children progress through school. Some girls talked nostalgically about PE at primary school that they experienced as less formal and more fun.

However there is also clear evidence that new concerns are also competing for their time and attention, particularly around their appearance. A concern to manage their appearance, and a growing lack of confidence in their appearance, combine to put many girls off taking part. At the same time, weight management can become a key motivation for many girls.



*“Because sport keeps you fit and you don’t want to get fat. That’s the worst thing in the world...” Year 5 girl*

Issues of self-esteem and body confidence were consistently raised in our focus groups. Girls said that it was not feminine to be sweaty, to get messy or muddy, or ruin one’s hair. Our focus groups support previously published research by GirlGuiding UK that shows girls attach strong importance to being thin, seeing fitness leading to muscle development as something for boys.

*“I think it is more easy for boys, they can go out and play football. I think for teenage girls, as well, it is harder. I think because girls have more pressure. Boys can go out to play football but if girls play football they think they are tomboys. I think girls get sweaty and don’t like it...” Year 8 girl*

This was also covered in the quantitative research, and showed a divergence in opinion between the most and least active girls.

**One in five (20%) secondary school girls who were most physically active said they “feel like their body is on show in PE and this makes them like PE less”. This rose to more than a third (35%) of the least active.**

*“The only thing that I don’t like is when you had to do it, like sports day or something... in front of the boys, like I hate that...” Year 10 girl*

**76% of all girls agree that “girls are self-conscious about their bodies”**

That reflects a broader difference in opinion between the most active and least active. Only one in ten (13%) secondary school girls who were most physically active said they “strongly agreed” that “girls are self-conscious about their bodies”. That rose to almost a third (31%) of girls who were least physically active.

The degree to which behaviours and types of appearance are so clearly gendered was very striking in the research. Importantly, these gendered ‘norms’ were seen to be particularly at play in relation to sport. As will be seen in the ‘Friends’ section, being ‘sporty’ is seen as a positive attribute for boys, but not for girls.

In addition, boys are seen to receive more encouragement to play sport than girls, and to have more role models.

**43% of all secondary age girls agreed that “there aren’t many sporting role models for girls” while those who are least physically active are twice as likely to “strongly agree” that “there aren’t many positive sporting role models for girls” as those who are most active.**

*“They just force us to do the same thing every year when you are asked and they are not listening to what people actually want to do”. Year 10 girl*



# Drivers of and barriers to participation



35% of all girls say that “I am motivated to be active because my mother/stepmother is active”

Attitudes to sport and physical activity are mixed and complex, but we have seen they are certainly not wholly negative among girls.

Our research revealed, however, that there are social and educational barriers – including from family, friends and above all schools – to participation in physical activity which reinforce the tendency of girls to drop out.

These factors emerged in both quantitative research and focus groups. We look at them in turn.

## Families

*Key findings:*

- Families have a big influence on activity levels of children, although that influence declines as children grew older.
- Generally, children said parents are very positive and play an important role both in terms of role modelling and also facilitating activity.
- Mothers are a particularly powerful source of encouragement for participation in sport and physical activity for younger girls.
- However, some parents can be complicit in girls’ disengagement from activity.
- Girls also said they were constrained by stricter rules as to where they could play.

A third of secondary girls and boys agree that “families are less supportive of girls’ involvement in sport and other physical activity”

Overall, girls told us that their families generally perceive sport and physical activity in a positive light. Many said their immediate family (especially parents) play an important role in encouraging their participation, through participation with them, through logistical support to get to venues and through positive role modelling.

It is, however, true that the level of parental support declines over time and becomes different in kind. From active participation, parents subsequently act more as facilitators, providing transport and funding for sporting activities. That was not a gender difference, being reported both by girls and boys.

*“Parents encourage you less when you get older... because they think it’s your responsibility now...” Year 8 girl*

There was some indication, across all of our focus groups with both boys and girls, that parents’ work and busy lifestyles limit their participation in sport and physical activity with children.

*“My mum doesn’t really do sport, because she owns her own business and it’s like she doesn’t have time to do it...” Year 8 girl*

*“You know when I was younger, we used to go to play cricket and stuff, but we don’t any more. Everyone’s gone busy now”. Year 7 BME girl*

*“My mum doesn’t let me (go to after-school activities) because there’s nobody to pick me up after club and my mum goes work, she comes back at 5, my dad works, he comes back in the morning...” Year 5 BME girl*

Other family members were also mentioned beyond parents: siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents were mentioned.

But worryingly, our research uncovered some indications of some parents being complicit in their daughters’ disengagement from physical activity, especially school sport and PE.

*“If I think back to some of my lessons this year the amount of times, ‘oh I’ve got a letter from my mum saying I don’t have to do PE because I’m not feeling very well’. Whereas other kids go ‘mum says I have got to take part’ and I think sometimes, yes there is a genuine reason why you can’t, but sometimes I think you play on it, that it is easy to get a letter because maybe the parents didn’t have a good experience of sport or don’t enjoy it, or don’t see the benefits from it. So it is like, well, ‘You are alright, you don’t have to do it today.’”Teacher interview*

Two further issues were raised in our focus groups with girls as sources of parental barriers to physical activity: the risk of playing out and the need to stay in to do chores.

Some girls said that their parents imposed rules regarding their safety that act as a barrier to spontaneous outdoor play. They said that they believed that they had more rules than boys regarding outdoor play. They told us that family rules could prevent their participation in sport and physical activity regarding:

**where they could play**  
**who they could play with**  
**what time they needed to be home**

Girls told us that their parents would discourage participation in activities that they thought were dangerous or likely to result in their injury.

*“My mum’s like proper paranoid. She does my head in because when she watches the news she hears all like these things about that happen to kids, like kidnap and that, so she doesn’t let me play out because she’s scared that it’ll happen to me”. Year 7 girl*

*“My grandad doesn’t like, he is scared if we go out. He likes us just staying in”. Year 8 girl*

There was some feedback from girls that participation in activity was being discouraged by the need to help around the home.

*“After school we don’t really do that much because there is not that much time. With just my mum around I have to help my mum with loads of stuff and we don’t really get to do sport”. Year 5 girl*

## Friends

*Key findings:*

- Girls are highly motivated by social aspects of participation and are very influenced by the behaviour of their friends – particularly as they get older.
- Being popular is not defined by being ‘sporty’ for girls – but is for boys. Boys receive more encouragement to be sporty from their friends.
- The absence of role models is seen by girls and teachers to be a key problem.
- The transition from primary to secondary school disrupts friendship groups and so participation.

In the focus groups, girls adopted a consistent classification of seven types of girl present at their school. These were:

- Sporty (the active, competitive fit girls)
- Tomboys (also active, with more male friends than usual, overlap with sporty)
- Popular (trendy, pretty, and confident)
- Girly (into make-up, hair, clothes and boys, overlap with popular)
- Smart/clever (academic achievers)
- Non-sporty (lazy, fat and inactive)
- Weird (loners, non-conformists and truants)

**57% of all girls are active because their friends are.**



What is significant about these groups is not that they are permanent – girls move between them and there is no reason to assume that the types will remain static – but that girls thought of PE and school sport as being designed for and enjoyed by the first two groups, while the aspiration for girls was to be part of the second two groups. In other words, being a sporty girl was not seen as negative: but it was not the highest aspiration a girl could have, and would attract less esteem than being part of the popular/girly group.

Our focus groups with girls suggested that, not surprisingly, sporty girls had sporty friends and that less active girls had less active friends. Sporty boys were perceived to be popular, although the same was not true for sporty girls.

*“The popular girls don’t do any sport but the popular boys love sport. The popular girls are more girly, really girly girly...” Year 7 girl*

Girls said that their friends could discourage their participation in sport and physical activity by persuading them to do other activities or by dropping out of school sport and PE lessons.

**57% of all girls agree that “girls drop out of sport and other physical activity because their friends do”.**

*“High school changes you because in primary school it’s different... you’re all older now and you’re teenagers and you see teenagers with all their hair done, make up, short skirts and everything... you want to be like everyone else”. Year 7 girl*

*“I don’t want to be sporty anymore because you know... it’s because you’re getting bigger, you’re growing older”. Year 5 girl*

*“Sometimes we’re sporty and sometimes we’re just really girly”. Year 5 girl*

Our focus groups indicated that one of the most enjoyable and motivating elements of sport and physical activity for girls is the social aspect. Girls said they were more comfortable participating in sport and physical activity with their friends.

*“When you be with your friends you feel more better and you take part with them and all that”. Year 7 girl*

Older girls said that they liked PE less when they were put into groups without close friends. Since both the transition from primary to secondary school and setting (where practiced) disrupted friendship groups, this has a disproportionate effect on girls’ activity levels compared to those of boys.

On the whole, girls felt that if their friends are active this would encourage them and make them feel more comfortable in participating in sport and physical activity. This was particularly the case with older girls (Years 8 to 10).

*“If you’re with your friend then you want to be a bit like them, you don’t want to be left out”. Year 7 girl*

## School

*Key findings:*

- School is seen as the key location where attitudes to sport and PA are formed, and where interests and skills are developed.
- The most active girls are very positive about PE and school sport and want more of it.
- The least active tend to be very negative about PE and school sport and feel their experiences at school are putting them off being active.
- The least active girls had enjoyed the less formal, less rule-based approach at primary school, and girls overall want more choice of activities in PE.
- Girls do enjoy competition and like the opportunity to develop their skills. However, they dislike some of the behaviours that can go with it such as being over-competitive and aggressive.
- Many girls lack confidence in their skills and abilities.
- The presence of boys can be very off-putting, and many girls do not like being seen by boys while they exercise.
- School space can be dominated by boys playing sport to the exclusion of girls and school facilities can be inadequate – girls are more likely to be turned off by dirty changing facilities.

- Girls would like teachers to be more encouraging and not just focus on the sporty.

- Teachers feel that PE is not valued as part of the curriculum although it has an important role in developing skills such as teamwork.

- Teachers believe that sport for its own sake was less important than trying to get all pupils active and learning.

School sport offers perhaps the greatest barriers to, and opportunities for, reversing the tendency towards inactivity among girls. Only the school setting offers the structure and – to put it bluntly – the potential for compulsory activity.

Everyone is aware of many examples of outstanding school sports provisions driven by committed PE staff who are leaders in their field. What our research shows, however, is that for many girls, school sport and PE can be as much of a barrier as an open door.

That was reflected in the feedback for the least physically active. Twice as many of them strongly agreed that “girls are put off sport and physical activity because of their experiences of school sport and PE”, compared with the views of girls who are the most physically active.

Choice – or a lack of it – emerged as a key barrier. A persistent complaint from girls in our focus groups was that they disliked being forced to do activities they didn’t like.

**One in five (22%) secondary school girls who are most physically active said they “don’t like the activities they get to do in PE” but that number increased almost half (46%) of the least active.**

While most schools do offer a variety of activities across the school year, it is not clear that girls are routinely offered a choice of activities, nor that they are systematically consulted on what activities they would like to participate in during PE lessons.

Focus group discussions suggest that many girls are more interested in less traditional and formal activities like dance or skateboarding. There was also a clear nostalgia for the days of primary school and the relatively unstructured, non-competitive activities which girls had enjoyed then.

*“When we was in the little school it was fun to participate in everything because you do different bits... it would be really fun and you don’t really care about winning or anything, but when you get older and you heard loads of people saying how good it is to win and stuff, it begins to get less fun because you know that you’ve got to do your best and if you don’t then that’s not good enough...” Year 10 girl*

## Competition

Our research shows that girls said they like competitive sport but not some of the behaviours associated with it. Girls draw a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ competition. Competition that is perceived by girls to be ‘bad’ is when it is:

“too competitive”

“unfair”

“not fun”

“boring”

“In a sport they were good at”

*“Well, good competition is like, where you don’t spoil it all with, just have fun”. Year 5 girl*

In general, it was not competition per se that girls say they dislike, but rather other people’s negative behaviour in competitive situations, including:

**cheating**

**fighting**

**arguing**

Girls’ view of ‘good winners’ and ‘bad winners’, as well as ‘good losers’ and ‘bad losers’ came through strongly in our focus groups. Older girls (Years 7 – 10) said that they disliked competition because it meant people were watching them. They described feeling embarrassed, feeling pressured and feeling judged. Older pupils were also more likely to state that sport being too competitive was something that influenced their participation.

48% of all girls “believe getting sweaty is not feminine”

*“Competition tends to bring out the worst in people...” Year 10 BME girl*

*“We wanted to do like a fun game with friends and all, we were actually being forced to do it and they try and make it competitive and just like shout at us to pass or whatever and we were just like, we want to just play about...” Year 10 girl*

Instead, they asked for:

**More friendly competitions (e.g. sports day-type tournaments, especially rounders)**

**A focus on fun (rather than skill development)**

**Fairer teams in games**

**Sports where competition was against one's personal best, not against another person or team**

*“But it would be quite fun, it would be a bit of a competition like timing each other to see how fast you can get across the wall. And just trying to beat your target, not try and beat anyone else's just yours...” Year 7 girl*

*“Friendly competitions, like just between little groups instead of like really competitive ones (are more fun)”. Year 10 girl*

More girls thought an increase in competition would be detrimental than beneficial.

### **Influence of boys**

In our focus groups, girls said they perceive some boys as being over-competitive, inconsiderate and arrogant. Boys were commonly cited by girls of all ages as a reason for why sport and physical activity is not perceived to be fun, particularly in relation to school PE lessons. Boys' negative attitudes about girls' abilities in sport and physical activity were also perceived to be a problem.

*“The boys are generally far more confident and sort of aggressive and imposing and so the girls, even confident girls who would speak up usually, sort of fade into the background and are quite quiet and a bit intimidated by them...” Teacher interview*

*“When we were younger I used to get up early in the summer and go out and playing. Now it is more about lie-ins and stuff. There is nothing for us to go outside and do. Before there used to be loads of activities that we could do on our street, we would play football. But as you get older the boys want to compete more”. Year 10 girl*

This raises questions about the way that teachers are controlling boys' behaviour in mixed PE lessons. The most common complaint from girls was in relation to boys contributing to a negative perception of competition, with girls describing boys in general as “over competitive” and complaining that boys “take over”.

*“It's the competitive element that they don't like. We try to give a wide variety including things like fitness and aerobics and dance and swimming. So I would hope that they wouldn't be put off because they wouldn't be sort of playing games every single week and feeling exposed, how good or bad they are, and being turned off by a high level of competition...” Teacher interview*

### **Teachers**

Girls said that teachers should be more encouraging and “not just focus on the sporty people”. They were concerned that teachers could be too strict and critical of their ability, and also recognised that PE was not regarded as highly within the school as academic subjects.

*“My teachers are funny and it makes me want to take part. Like when PE's over we think we can't wait until next week because you know the teachers are going to do something funny and make it fun”. Year 7 girl*

*“Since September we haven't done one physical lesson, we have just done coursework”. Year 10 girl*

**34% of all secondary age girls agree “that my teacher only pays attention to the kids who are good at sports”.**

*“For sports, when they actually do tournaments they only take a couple of people... they say the best people who will make them win, but there are some people who actually enjoy the sport but they may not be as good as the others and they just don't get the chance to do it”. Year 7 girl*

### **Confidence – skills & ability**

Competition clearly highlights competency in a way that non-competitive sport or simple physical activity does not. But the nature of PE can also expose girls' wider anxieties, reinforcing a lack of self-esteem.

*“If you're in a team and people don't help you or something, they make fun of you and stuff if you're doing something wrong...” Year 8 girl*

*“I think competition doesn't improve how well you are at that sport, it just makes you feel, well obviously he or she is better than me, there is no point me playing against them or trying...” Year 8 girl*

*“You're quite exposed as a student in PE, whether you're any good or not, at that particular sport. In a classroom lesson you'll maybe do a piece of written work, you don't necessarily have to share that with the whole of the class. It's not obvious for everyone to see how good you are at that subject. Whereas you are very exposed in a PE lesson, and that goes back to whether students put off trying even, rather than they'd be seen messing around, not putting any effort in, than to be seen to be trying and then failing”. Teacher interview*

They said that being embarrassed by a lack of skill, not being good enough and not enjoying struggling put them off participating in sport and physical activity.

*“Girls are quite emotionally sensitive I imagine and maybe they're thinking, oh I'm not very good at this sport. I think a lot of the time girls would rather not be seen to be trying rather than to try and then fail and feel a fool in front of their peers. I think there's that sort of pressure and that sort of barrier that's stopping them”. Teacher*

### **Use of school space and facilities**

Girls consistently called for changes to school facilities and more innovative use of the school timetable, including:

**Improved changing rooms**

**Going out of school**

**More playtime (primary)**

**More PE lessons (secondary)**

In our focus groups with secondary school girls, they said that their activity levels had declined when they went to secondary school as they did not go out at break times. Teachers also reflected on the fact that at primary school pupils have to go outside at break times but can stay inside during break-time at secondary school.

Similar concerns were raised about facilities, with girls suggesting that schools were still operating PE lessons within the context of inadequate facilities that present additional barriers to girls' continued participation.

Facility concerns were associated also with the inability of girls to secure equal space with boys. There was a common perception among girls that boys dominated outdoor space in playgrounds and school fields: “the boys take all the space”.

Girls specifically identified this as a key barrier to their participation. Even in situations when activities were put on at break time for both boys and girls, girls said that they were invariably dominated by boys.

*“When the boys are out, when we're like playing games, like rough games like football or tag rugby or something, they always start making up their own rules and like, start, like say if you had to catch a ball for instance, they don't give the girls a chance, they just catch them all themselves”. Year 5 girl*

*“Well at break time, the boys can do table tennis, and well, you can as well... well we can but the girls don't really tend to... but the boys take all the space...” Year 7 girl*

*“Outdoor space is usually used at break times – boys playing football. More boys use the space more than girls, and more the older years rather than the younger ones”. Year 8 girl*

45% of girls say “sport is too competitive

### The views of teachers

The teacher interviews threw up a number of useful perspectives.

Teachers felt that PE was not overall a priority in school or particularly valued against the more academic parts of the curriculum. That meant that the abilities and qualities of the person teaching sport and PE had crucial impact, particularly when it came to engaging those who were not naturally inclined to be active participants.

Teachers felt that the best results were achieved with a group by focusing not on pure success in PE, but on the wider values which activity could bring. So rather than focusing on the sport – e.g. football, on the skills being developed, e.g. teamwork.

*“they are dipping off in Year 9, because they are doing all sorts of things with their bodies, so this year I have adapted the programme some are doing more of a leadership course, taking on different roles... they work as a group, the love to work in small groups, they like to work independently in small groups. They get very conscious of performing in front of others”. Teacher, secondary level*

Teachers supported the idea of involving girls themselves in designing lessons and facilitating games very effective, as well as creative ideas for encouraging effort such as ideas of the personal best using the Nike app, for example, as well as reducing the fear of failure for the least active by working in smaller groups or with friendship groups.

*“in Years 10 and 11 we give them the option to choose what sports they would like to do each term. That has pros and cons, because on the one hand they’re choosing the sport from a list, so you would hope they would be more enthusiastic. On the other hand sometimes that means that they’re in mixed groups because we don’t have the staff to offer all those options and offer single sex groups”. Teacher, secondary level*

They recognised that body issues were occurring earlier in school and that this was a barrier to participation.

*“I think the girls are now maturing earlier physically and I think they are more aware of their bodies... I’ve taught in year 5 and 6 for quite a few years and I think the issue is that they all get changed separately and that sort of thing, they are more conscious now”. Teacher, primary level*

There was no feedback from teachers that facilities or funding were inadequate. Overall, teachers recognised that they themselves are key to ensuring PE is inclusive of all girls, central to which is a need to listen to girls and be open to new ideas and approaches.

“For instance there’s a dance club that runs at lunchtime, it is all girls and they are doing a cross between choreography and dance and keep-fit... and then we have actually done some girls-only football sessions”

## Conclusions



- Girls commonly felt that they want to be and enjoy being active, and recognise the benefits, so there is strong latent demand.

- Overall, girls are positive about sport and physical activity – although they are less positive than boys and still see many aspects of being sporty as unfeminine.

- Girls generally are more likely to be motivated by social and health benefits of taking part whereas boys overall are more likely to be motivated by being part of a team and representing a team.

- Girls are concerned about choice, having fun, being with friends and enjoying sport rather than competition and representing the school.

- They are also concerned about the attitudes of teachers, of boys and the poor quality of facilities. And they would also like to be asked for their views and see these reflected in provision.

### The key barriers girls face are a mix of the practical:

Lack of support from parents

Insufficient choice of activity

No-one to be active with

Available space dominated by boys

Parents set more stringent rules about playing outside for girls

Higher expectation that girls will help out around the house

### And the attitudinal:

Lack of confidence in skills

Only the talented really encouraged

Self-consciousness about being seen exercising, and getting hot and sweaty

Being ‘sporty’ still not seen as aspirational for girls

Sport and physical activity not seen as important as academic work

Few role models for girls

Of course, some of these barriers are deep rooted and entrenched – particularly around notions of femininity, pressures to be thin not fit, perceptions of sport being masculine and only of value if competitive. And parents clearly need to more effectively engaged in not just getting – but keeping – kids active – particularly as they get older.

Yet the obvious area for action - and the place where the most direct impact on fitness and health levels among girls will be felt – is the school system. Schools offer the structured environment in which physical activity is time-tabled and participation can be measured. But that can only be achieved if schools offer an inclusive range of activities that appeal to more than the sporty (of both sexes, but particularly girls), and delivered in a way that encourages girls to participate.

There are already many examples of schools that offer this kind of PE. We need more of them.



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**The Toolkit is available online:**

<http://wsff.org.uk/publications/fact-sheets/changing-the-game-for-girls>